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ABSTRACT

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Urban Classrooms as Sites of Reading the World: Negotiating Critical Literacy in a Test-driven Era

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Abstract

This paper addresses issues of teacher negotiation and development of a critical literacy curriculum through reporting data from a 3-year ethnographic study of an urban middle school in the U.S.A. The research findings reveal the possibilities to actualize democratic and liberation education under the pressure of meeting the constantly changing state-level and national proficiency standards in urban schools with limited resources. The study suggests that educational researchers who advocate for progressive education and the school teachers who strive to implement the progressive ideals must join together in a pluralistic community of workers for democracy. The researcher concludes that the field of curriculum studies should be relocated to local school sites in order to understand the transformative goals of educational scholarship.

Keywords: *urban education, critical literacy, curriculum studies.*

Urban Classrooms as Sites of Reading the World:
Negotiating Critical Literacy in a Test-driven Era

In the dawn of the 21st century, a proliferation of global capitalism has great impact on labor conditions, politics, and educational policies at large. Facing with the challenges of global economic competition, public schools are expected to make changes in order to supple competent workers for the needs of the corporate societies. After signing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, American President Bush (2002) proclaimed, "There's no greater challenge than to make sure that every child … receive a first-class education in America … The first step to make sure that a child is not shuffled through is to test that child as to whether or not he or she can read and write, or add and subtract." In his speech, public schools are held accountable for students' learning outcome and the single most important criterion to judge the success or failure of a school has been limited to the state mandated tests scores on the 3 R's. To president Bush and many of the like-minded education reformers, the test scores on the 3 R's are what accountability means.

The teaching of basic literacy and numeracy is indispensable in the public school curriculum in order to cultivate the deliberative skills if students are to become democratic citizens. However, it takes more than the basics to prepare democratic citizens (Gutmann, 1999). In the United States, public schools have been known for their struggles to equalize the distribution of educational resource along race and class lines (Anyon, 1997; Barndt & Mcnally, 2001; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1992). Urban educators, working with the communities suffering the most from the global economic competition, are at the frontline of the proficiency movement.

In the midst of widespread attacks on public education, educators who believe that school can be and should be democratic places need to ask questions about "what works in school? (Apple & Beane, 1995)" Living in an era when the notion of freedom is not only commodified in the American society, but also a political propaganda for further dividing people around the world, the project ahead of the progressive educators is to find ways to overcome what stands in the ways of our humanity (Ayers, 1998). An educational system grounded on the democratic principals that guards the values of freedom and justice is urgently needed in our time (Apple, 1996; Apple & Beane, 1995; Arhar, 1997; Banks, 1997; Beans, 1997; Carr & Hartnert, 1996; Gay, 1994; Giroux, 1998; Gutmann, 1999; McLaren, 1995). The literacy curriculum we need is to engage the youth to read, listen, speak, and write in language that can represent their rights and the rights of others. Critical literacy aiming at sharpening the youth's sensibility toward social injustice would prompt them to ask why things are the way they are, to analyze what is going on in their life world, to question who benefits from the way things are, and to act on the belief of making things more equitable (Comer, 2001; McLaren, 1995). As Freire (1998) suggests, critical literacy enables us to read (recognize) the injustice, and to rewrite (transform) the world through our collective struggle against the oppressive forces that marginalize the lives of the poor, the racial, linguistic, and gender/sexuality minorities.

The fight against the injustice and oppression was not just an individual task, but that it required collective effort and prolong struggle. Progressive educators need to explore the possibility and pedagogies to fight back the oppressive component embedded in schooling. When reform is promoted in the name of giving choices to parents, empowering teachers and localizing public schools curriculum, educational research that documents the struggles and difficulties progressive educators encounter

in their schools in the test-driven era is urgently needed.

This study is designed to enhance our understanding of the possibilities to actualize liberation education under the pressure of meeting the proficiency standard. Being a part of a three-year ethnography study, the researcher worked with a classroom-based educator in an urban middle school to develop critical literacy curriculum for a reading class in the midst of proficiency movement. Together, they tried to find ways to develop critical literacy curriculum in urban school settings.

Recognizing the ideals about curriculum had to fit into the district-wide demands for measurable students proficiencies, the researcher had a closer look at emancipatory curricular approach that was negotiated within curriculum planning and implementation between educators who are willing to cross the borderline of nationalities, gender, and racial differences. In this study, the researcher does not intend to present a showcase for progressive curriculum. Instead, the researcher addresses issues that are related to the efforts and constraints of implementing a critical literacy class through collaboration between the teacher and the researcher. This study intends to explore critical pedagogies in order to actualize the emancipatory goal of education for urban youths,.

Theoretical framework: A Critical Feminist Interpretive Inquiry

Human activity or material life not only structures but sets limits on human understanding. In Hegel's dialectic theory, it is the disadvantageous position that the slave has that privilege the slave's knowledge over that of the master. Marx's "proletarian standpoint," along with Engles, and Georg Lukacs, exhibits a similar epistemological viewpoint. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding, Bell Hooks, Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, Jane Flax, and Alison Jaggar argue that knowledge, as a culture's best belief, is socially situated. As

Donna Haraway (1991) explained, this "situated knowledge," when it is derived from socially and culturally marginalized locations, becomes a resource of epistemic privilege. She said,

> Situated knowledge are particularly powerful tools to produce maps of consciousness for people who have been inscribed within the marked categories of race and sex that have been so exuberantly produced in the histories of masculinist, racist, and colonialist dominations (p. 111).

In history, women are treated as aliens by the dominant social institutions and conceptual schemes. Harding argues that it is not through genetics that women have knowledge to help them comprehend the social order, but, rather, it is the disadvantaged historical position which privileges them to make fewer false, less partial, and less distorted socially constructed claims than the claims resulting from the lives of men in the dominant groups (Harding, 1991). She asserts that women's knowledge is more privileged than that of men's because women are valuable "strangers" to the social order. Therefore, women's knowledge, along with the life experience of others who are in disadvantaged positions, needs to be recognized as an invaluable knowledge resource.

Knowledge of marginality

The assumption behind the research design is a critical feminist one: I believe that people on the margin of the society are more critical of the system than people in the mainstream of the knowledge production system because their experience of being disadvantaged in a system allows them to see and feel things that reveal the problems of their society. To understand the difficulties of a system, one can not begin from the center of power, but rather from the margin. Urban schools, while in the geographic center of cities, are located at the economic, political, social, and cultural

margin of the American society. In almost every city I have visited in the United States, a couple of blocks away from the commercial center is the poorest area in the state. Democracy and freedom, ideals that are taken for granted in suburban and rural America, are challenged in urban schools. I believe that democratic education should not be a privilege which is only available to children coming from affluent and wealthy school districts. It should be – indeed it must be – available to children from lower socio-economic families. I have come to believe that the urban school is the place to understand the challenges of democratic education in American public schooling.

Dialectical Exchanges of Interpretations in Interpretive Inquiry

There is a difference between seeing the phenomenon and interpreting what it means. Even with one phenomenon, there are always multiple interpretations possible. Whose viewpoints get to be represented, whose voices get to be heard, and who makes decisions, that is, who gets to control the making of knowledge through academic research? As Richardson (1992) asked, "How to do sociological research and how to write it so that the people who teach me about their lives are honored and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently" (p. 108).

In a cross-cultural ethnographic study, the cultural ethnographer goes into a place where the sign system is constructed differently from the researcher's native society. One thing happens, one word is spoken, one comment is made in a meeting or in a specific location, and these occurrences not only present the researcher with different weights of meaning based upon the listener's preconceived notions of what should be said, but also all of these signs present different messages to the other listeners who are involved. When an ethnographer goes into a place, the interpretations made by the researcher will likely be different from those made by the natives. Why?

Because the researcher has a different relationship to, and different experiences associated with, the words and actions of the research setting. The researched also have their individual values different from one another in a setting. For example, in the case of this project, the research subjects told the researcher what they thought and felt about certain incidents and gave various reasons for their own thoughts and feelings. Many comments they made clearly were related to their self interest. There is nothing wrong with that. We speak from our point of view, and this point of view has its sources in the life experiences and the desires and longings of the speakers. And, it also can be said that knowledge that is derived from values and beliefs is always pragmatic. It has to work for the speaker in some way. The life experience is an ongoing process as long as one is alive. Some values and beliefs do not remain static over time particularly when the speakers change their positions in a power structure. Thus, the viewpoints, values, and beliefs are always subject to change (Smith, et. el., 1997).

Is it possible that one can believe in one thing, and do another. It is not only possible, it happens all the time. Beliefs are a part of a cultural system that often are rationalized in a cultural context; whereas actions take place in different locations – some in public, some in private. Interactions with people in different locations shape the actors' ways of communication. Some action may directly challenge the coherence and consistency of one's belief system. This causes not only a personal struggle to make sense of what happened to the observed subject, but changes and inconsistencies can also puzzle the observer. Inconsistency happens in every day life. I might say the only thing that is consistent is inconsistency. This inconsistency reflects what hermeneutics calls a dialectical exchange of interpretations among actors within sign systems.

As Shaun Gallagher (1992) suggests, the process of learning in inquiry is an

interchange of interpretations that is a dialectical give and take between one interpretation and another. Moreover, each interpretation may be conditioned by, as well as serve to condition other interpretations. Therefore, inquiry is always a hermeneutical experience that always involves interpretation. A hermeneutical description of inquiry also makes a strong and clear statement about the fundamental role that tradition plays in constructing preconception, prejudgment, and prejudices in interpretations. This fore-structure of understanding could be used either for collecting more biased knowledge, or making possible learning as a reflective process. According to Heidegger, tradition is interwoven with learning as a dialectical interchange of transcendence and appropriation which requires both participation in the dialogue of tradition and reflection upon tradition. To hermeneutical theorists, tradition is transformed in one's educational experience. Learning in inquiry is viewed as a collective effort which makes knowing possible (Gallagher, 1992).

Also, Gallagher claims that language does not transport pieces of one person's reality into another's, nor is learning a simple transmission of information between knowers. While Gallagher claims that knowing is constructed by the knower, the self is found in a collective notion of tradition and language. In hermeneutics, it is not we who create language, but it is language which makes us who we are; and it is not that we build upon our tradition, but it is our tradition which lives within us and makes transcendence possible. Therefore, there is both an epistemological and an ontological concern of being in an interpretive inquiry (Gallagher, 1992).

Method: An ethnographic case study

This research was conducted and written as an ethnographic case study of one urban public middle school in the Midwest of the United States. As a part of a three-year ethnography study that was conducted between 1997 and 2000, the

researcher and the teacher met one hour each week in Fall 2000 to co-develop a critical literacy curriculum. This participant observation fieldwork approach consists of a) long term participation (three years) and observation in an urban middle school; b) careful recording of interviews and some class discussion; c) analytic induction applied to field notes and transcripts of classroom discussion and interviews; and d) detailed description through use of narrative quotations (Erickson, 1986).

The class, school, and neighborhood

The school where the research is conducted is located in the downtown area of a large manufacturing city in the Midwest of the United States. The school has a low socioeconomic population with about 80% of students receiving free lunch, 7% reduced lunch fees and only 13% who pay for their own lunch. Also, 85% of the students are transported by school buses, because only 15% live within walking distance of the school. The roughly eight hundred students in the sixth through eighth grades at the school came from more than 70 different elementary schools. Thirty percent of the student population were enrolled in special education, ESL, or bilingual programs; 90 in special education, and 131 in the E[illegible]rogram and/or bilingual programs, (some students where enrolled in both programs). The achievement scores on 8th grader state mandated tests were flat, generally falling below the metropolitan district average.

According to an official school statement, this school serves the most diverse student population among the city's public middle schools. The student population was composed of 55% African American, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 18% white, 4% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 1% others. The African American students were native speakers of English mixed with Ebonics. Many Hispanic American students, the second largest ethnic and racial group in the building, spoke two languages.

However, while many of them are fluent in both spoken languages, they demonstrated low writing and reading proficiency in both written languages. Many of the Asian American students were first generation immigrants. Some had come as refugees as a result of political conflicts in South East Asia. None of the Asian immigrant students came from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, or China. While they often came from large families, some had lost close relatives such as a mother, father, or siblings during their "trip" to the United States. They usually looked physically smaller than their chronological peers.

While the school does not provide official documentation on the breakdown of the racial and ethnicity makeup of teachers and administrators, white staff members were the dominant group. The principal was a white male, whereas the assistant principals were both African Americans: one female and one male. The learning coordinators and guidance counselors, school psychologist, and school social worker were all white. The breakdown among approximately fifty teachers was 70% White, 20% African American and 10% Hispanic/Latino/American Indiana teachers. There were no Asian American faculty in this middle school. I was the only Asian woman in the building during the time I was there. The majority of teachers were women.

Because of its downtown location, female school teachers often expressed concern about their safety in the neighborhood. For example, the first day I visited the school, I went out for lunch with one senior female teacher to a nearby McDonald's restaurant. Before we left the building, she told me not to bring my purse, but just cash. I did as she suggested. When we were waiting for the traffic signal, she explained to me that one female teacher was robbed when she tried to cross the road at the same location where we were standing. She further commented that she thought it was the fault of the teacher. When I asked her why she thought so, she replied that she thought that teacher should have had sense enough not to carry a

big nice looking bag in this area. When male teachers were not around, such concerns for safety sometimes took the form of joking in the teachers' lounge, for example, on how female teachers responded to feeling nervous about "the weird guy walking toward them." While I did not personally encounter any of the things described by the teachers, I did sometimes see homeless people wondering around the streets. I also noticed that there were sometimes car windows smashed and glass scattered on the sidewalk and on the street where I parked my car. I also learned later that crime and violence are a part of the life experience that some children have to deal with.

Surrounding the school were local residential homes that looked old and rundown. But contrary to what I heard from teachers, I felt the neighbors were very friendly to me. Take small things such as parking at the curb as an example. Because of the limited space in the school parking lot, people who were not full-time employees were expected to park on the streets near the school. I was not good at parking on the narrow street with tight parking spaces. Sometimes an old African American man who often sat on the front stairs of his home would give me instructions about where I should turn to get into a small space between a car and a garbage can without hitting anything. Or I met people walking on the streets and we nodded, smiled, and said good morning to each other. I also twice experienced leaving my car parked on the street unlocked for the whole day and found when I returned that no one had touched it. The car I drove to the school looked relatively newer than most of the cars parked on the streets. If it were in Taipei, the car would have been gone in minutes. In my own experience, people I met in the school neighborhood were more friendly than people I met in the suburbs of the city.

When I walked into this urban school, I did not see what is always described in the mainstream media as typical of inner-city schools, that is, violence. Most

students were like the students I taught in Taiwan. They were teenagers with their own sense of style. However, they did speak much more loudly than my teenage students in Taiwan and college students at Indiana University. They often screamed at one another during arguments or when they got mad or upset. One female teacher kept a megaphone under her desk, which she used when she wanted her students to return to their seats and keep quiet. The volume of noise in classrooms was one major thing that I had to struggle to get used to. Students were also very physical in interacting with their classmates. Sometimes they pushed each other. Sometimes I saw groups of boys bullying another boy in the hallway when teachers were not around. One "game" boys played in the hallway during breaks was to have one boy lie on the floor, twisting his body around, while other boys pretending to kick him. The boys who participated in such a "game" were giggling and laughing (including the boy who was on the floor). Being aware that "play" says a lot in shaping values, I often shared with teachers my concern about the kinds of "games" played in the hallway. However, teachers always told me to ignore it because kids were just playing with each other.

Although the building was well built, the entry hallway was decorated with beautiful flags and the floors were clean, the students' bathrooms were very dirty. Because there were no paper towels for students to dry their hands, the cloth towels became very dirty before they were changed. In the afternoon, the washbasin was usually cluttered with all sorts of sticky things. On many days the faucets did not work. The janitors told me that there were students who urinated on the wall and the floors. While I was in the school, I got sick more frequently than at any other time in my life.

While the children sometimes could not afford to pay bus fees, they did have money to buy brand-name sports shirts and sneakers such as Tommy Hilfiger or Nike. Boys liked to wear

oversized baggy pants and layers of shirts. Many boys had very stylish haircuts. Some boys wore heavy hair cream if they had longer hair. Girls liked to wear tight shorts and high heeled shoes. Many girls wore heavy makeup. Some younger girls who did not wear makeup sometimes had gold or silver powder on their eyebrows. They were dressed and made up as if they were going to parties. This style appeared to be part of the pop culture of American city kids.

During the years the research was conducted, the district was under scrutiny by the state governor because its students had scored low in the past. So, under threat of drastic consequences, the district was required to meet the state standards. If scores did not improve in the next round of tests, the school was faced with student disenrollment and administrator and teacher dismissals. Under pressure to meet the district's demands, the teachers spent most of their energy teaching straight to the test and found little space for innovative curricula. Even under such pressure, however, many teachers were still trying to find ways to enrich the learning experience of their children and to make the school a learning community for both teachers and students. The teacher, an African American man who taught a language arts reading class and participated in the study of developing critical literacy curriculum, was one of them. I would not have found the level of urban educators efforts and commitment imaginable had I not been granted the opportunity to work with them. Nor would I have witnessed and experienced the kind of efforts the teachers had to make to keep their dream alive.

Go against the stream: Negotiating critical literacy in a test-driven era

In a school meeting, a teacher expressed her view on the proficiency movement:

> Now we've been led to believe that by John Walker [superintendent] saying "All third-graders will read, and if you don't teach anything else, you teach reading." You know, so all the third graders know it. And that gives you the impression that everything else is down the tubes. Well, I think we don't need to get down to "back to basics." That's what I think people are -- if I had to

> choose a way to label what people are thinking what the proficiency [movement] is about, is back to basics. Reading, writing, arithmetic, straightforward, rote memory stuff, nothing else. Now the proficiency [test] keeps spinning around and changing, so none of us knows what they are going to be.....The question is, does that mean that we have to change the culture of this building, which was always project-based, you know, selective content, not lock-step content. ...We teach concepts, we do project-based stuff. And I don't think that has to change. I think that's the culture of this building (fieldnote, 2001).

The district was under scrutiny by the state governor because its students had scored low in the past. So, under threat of drastic consequences, the district was now required to meet the state standards. If scores did not improve in the next round of tests, the school was faced with student disenrollment and administrator and teacher dismissals. Under pressure to meet the district's demands, the teachers spent most of their energy teaching straight to the test and found little space for innovative curricula. The interdisciplinary teaching that had been planned in 1991 and implemented for a few years had brought various dimensions of human knowledge into classrooms from across different subject areas. Any talk of such curriculum in the new test-driven era had become empty promises. Even under such pressure, however, many teachers were still trying to find ways to enrich the learning experience of their children and to make the school a learning community for both teachers and students. Mr. Parker, an African American teacher who taught a language arts reading class, was one of them. This research is devoted to those teachers who took on heavy workloads to fulfill the early promises of the district and to realize their dreams. I would not have found the level of their efforts and commitment imaginable had I not been granted the opportunity to work with Mr. Parker. Nor would I have witnessed and experienced the kind of efforts the teachers had to make to keep their dream alive.

The interdisciplinary curriculum

The existing literature on the benefits of interdisciplinary curricular approaches receieve a great amount of attention on a theoretical level (Apple & Beane, 1995; Arhar, 1997; Beane & George, 1996; Brodhagen, 1995; Elmore, 1990; Fullan, 1991;Glickman, 1995; Iran-Nejad, 1990; Sarason, 1990); b). Many university scholars have conjectured about the pedagogies required to implement such a curricular approach (Beane, 1997; Bernstein, 1975; Brodhagen, 1995; Jacobs, 1989; James, 1972; Lewis, 1995; Ninno, 2000; Sorenson, 1995; Wagstaff, 1995; White, 1992; Wilson, 1998). Overall, the tone of these publications have been similar to the marketing strategies used for promoting commercial products; which is telling the potential customers why it is good for them and various way they can use it. However, little attention has been paid to identifying the constraints in the implementation of such a curricular approach in an actual urban school setting where both human and material resources were limited. Neither has much research focused on the values that emerge from the negotiation process among teachers whose values and beliefs come from diverse schools of thoughts and life experiences. When such an innovative approach as curricular disciplines is glibly suggested, few advocates mention that single discipline-based classes has been part of educational practice for at least a century. Thinking about curriculum, then, is embedded in teachers' consciousness as they intuitively choose familiar and conventional curricular approaches. Had I not had this opportunity to work with Mr. Parker, but had been simply a researcher who observed other teachers conduct their classroom activities, I would never have learned what was asked of teachers who practice interdisciplinary approaches.

University faculty talk about team planning, interdisciplinary teaching, and other forms of progressive curriculum without ever realizing the limited time and meager

human and material resources available in urban schools. Without my actual teaching involvement, neither would I have had a closer look at the communication processes about curricular approaches among teachers with different value systems and distinctive beliefs. It was also important for me to realize that my ideals about curriculum had to fit into the district-wide demands for measurable students proficiencies. The following sections in this study address issues that are related to the efforts and constraints of implementing a critical literacy class through team planning in the midst of outcome based reform. In this study, I do not intend to present a showcase for curriculum integration. Rather, I would like to raise issues that I became aware of through practice, and to suggest that progressive educators, who promote curriculum integration approaches in urban setting from the distance of university classroom look closely at the constraints and obstacles that teachers are faced with in urban settings. And perhaps, together, combining the theoretical and ideal with the possibilities for practice in real settings, we can find ways to actualize the progressive ideal in urban schools.

Getting to Know You

I had seen Mr. Parker at various occasions in school meetings and at school events. It was clear from observing his interactions with others that he was very well-like and respected among faculty members and students. Often he was the master of ceremonies of school concerts and other public events because he was very well-spoken and had a good sense of humor. He had a confident, yet flexible, manner. He continuously showed a strong capacity to empathize with diverse perspectives when issues were controversial. He had a close, respectful relationship with students. I never heard him yell at students or put them down. When he was in charge of detention, he always talked to students in the manner of a brother or

father, displaying kind attitudes and supportive language. Students, in return, showed a great respect toward him and considered him one of their favorite teachers. Particularly, many of the young African American boys on his team saw him as their role model.

In Mr. Parker's class, he created a secure space where students seemed comfortable to be themselves and learned to interact with their peers in respectful and friendly ways. Of the one hundred and eighteen students enrolled in his four sections of reading class, nearly 51% were of African American heritage, 21% were of European American heritage, 15% were Hispanic American, 10% Asian American, and 3% of other racial and cultural heritages (Central Middle School team grade distribution list). Typically, the white students, being a minority at Central Middle School, interacted with various other racial and ethnic groups. However, because the white students were the second largest racial group in Mr. Parker's team, there was less interaction between white students and other racial groups compared to that of other teams. The new immigrant students, mostly Hispanic American and Asian American, perhaps because they had different degrees of proficiency in English, tended to cluster together and were somewhat isolated in terms of peer relationships. Being the only African American teacher on his team, Mr. Parker often expressed his view that urban education had to begin with the community culture, and he stressed the need to enrich and diversify the youth's learning by providing experiences outside of the school curriculum. He often invited people from diverse cultural backgrounds and with different expertise into his classrooms. He also spent his weekend time doing community work.

The first time I visited Mr. Parker's class, he was teaching poetry structure. He was using a poem written by an African American boy about his feelings about his neighborhood. Because I did not have an English literature background, the nature

of poem styles in western literature was new to me. Therefore, I was like the students in his class, fascinated with his story-telling way of reviewing the structure of this poem that he had reproduced on a transparency and projected on the board.

The second half of the class included an activity that involved students guessing the meanings of vocabulary words that Mr. Parker wrote on the board. These words were taken from a novel that the students were reading. The majority of students were very enthusiastically involved in guessing the meaning of the words. However, I noticed that of the three Asian American boys in this class, only one was actively involved in answering the questions. The other two looked subdued and were not as engaged in the activity as the majority of his other students. I also noticed that Mr. Parker consistently ignored the only Asian student who was actively involved in trying to answer questions. For example, when Mr. Parker asked the first question, the Asian American boy raised his arm for about forty seconds – which was quite a long time compared to his peers. Still, Mr. Parker did not call him. He called on an African American boy to answer the question. When he moved to the next question, the same pattern was repeated. The Asian American boy raised his arm again, however, a black boy was called upon to answer this question. After this activity, Mr. Parker went to the chalkboard to erase the written definitions that the class had arrived at. He asked, "Now that everybody has copied down the definitions, may I erase them?" The Asian boy raised his hand and responded, "No, you may not." Then he continued to copy the definitions. Although it was clear that he had heard this request because he looked back and found the boy raised his left arm, Mr. Parker said nothing and continued to erase the words on board. After Mr. Parker erased the board, he wrote a new question on the board. This time, there were only two students with their hands up, the same Asian boy and an African American girl. Mr. Parker picked the African American girl to answer the question. Later when Mr.

Parker moved from table to table asking students questions, the Asian American boy was once again ignored even though Mr. Parker interacted with other students at his table, a Hispanic American boy, a white boy, and another Asian American boy who never said a word or raised his hand during the entire class period. The Asian American boy was never called upon to answer questions during the entire class period.

After class, I went to Mr. Parker and told him that I enjoyed his class very much and I liked the poem he chose for the class. I thought it was a very moving poem that I could relate to and I thought his students were also very much engaged in his class. They obviously knew more than I did about this area. Because I taught language art classes to Taiwanese high school students who were considered to be at-risk before I came to the United States, Mr. Parker and I then talked about ways of using literature to bring students' life experiences into the classroom and to empower students with situated knowledge derived from all walks of life and diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts and that legitimated their own diverse perspectives.

Before I first visited Mr. Parker's class, I already knew that there was a relatively large population of immigrant Asian students on his team compared to that of other teams at the school because 10% of the students on his team were Asian American, whereas only 4% of the total student population at this school were Asian American students. After having seen the interactions between Asian American students and Mr. Parker, I was curious as to the reason for his neglect of the Asian American students. I decided to ask him how the immigrant students were doing in his class. He replied that they did not answer questions unless he specifically called them. Knowing that teachers sometimes are not aware of the interaction between themselves and the students; and also that their perceptions are easily shaped by their

preconceived notions about the racial, gender, and social class status of students, I was worried about the impact of his non-recognition of the Asian American students. Thus, I thought that perhaps the literature of Asian American children's life experiences might be helpful, not only to engage students who were marginalized in this school, but to change Mr. Parker's and other native born students' relationships with the Asian immigrant children. With such a thought, I mentioned to Mr. Parker that I happened to have a book that contained some poems written by Vietnamese American immigrant children and I told him that I found them very powerful just like the one by the African American boy that he used in this class. Mr. Parker showed a great interest in getting to know the literature created by immigrant children and told me that it would be great if I would show the book to him someday. The next day, I bought him the book that was created by first generation Vietnamese American youths in the new land of America. It was a book on cultural experiences expressed in visual artworks such as paintings, photos and sculptures, as well as different styles of literature such as poems, letters, short stories, and essays. When he saw the powerful images that displayed in children's artworks and variety of writing styles, he seemed to like it immediately. I told him that he could keep the book if he found it useful for his class, that it would be a gift from me.

Mr. Parker's focus on creative products related to the students' backgrounds would not last for long. Time went by fast and proficiency soon became the dominant theme in almost every subject area meeting and classroom agenda because the district demanded to see 8th graders' test performance. Reading, particularly, was one major focal point of the proficiency tests. Therefore, the principal emphasized the superintendent's order, "If you don't teach anything else, you teach reading." One afternoon during the first week of September, when Mr. Parker and I happened to meet in the hallway, he told me that he had just thought about me a

couple days ago when he considered having a curriculum unit on Asian culture in his reading class. He said that there was a two-week period between two district subject matter tests toward the end of October. He wanted to use those two weeks to reward his students for having spent a lot of time preparing for and taking district mandated tests. Because he thought there was little attention paid to Asian cultures in the United States, and that current school curricula had little connection to the life experiences of the Asian immigrant children on his team, he thus thought that introducing some experiences of Asian people would be fun and educational. He told me that the book I had given him expressed Vietnamese American children's cultural experiences. He thought that the children's interpretation of their cultural identity as Vietnamese Americans offered very insightful ideas for the development of curricular materials. He asked me whether I thought developing a unit on this ethnic/national group was a good idea. I confirmed that his idea of focusing in depth on one national or ethnic group in Asia was better than covering the whole range of Asian cultures. The curriculum would avoid lumping all national groups together thereby reinforcing the stereotype that Asian people were all the same because they look alike. Besides, a Vietnamese focus might be closer to the life experiences of the Southeast Asian children on their team. Mr. Parker asked me whether I would be interested in working with him to develop this two-week unit. He thought there would be enough time to get the unit ready since there were nearly two months to prepare for the class.

I thought that working with him to develop a curricular unit on this topic would be fun and a great learning opportunity for me. The task itself would be rather challenging because I had little prior knowledge of Vietnamese' history and culture. However, I was not sure whether the reason he asked me to participate in his class was that he thought I was knowledgeable about Vietnamese culture because I gave

him the book or because I came from Asia. I thus told him that it would be my honor to work with him, but I would need to do research on this subject because I had little prior knowledge about Vietnamese culture and history except watching the Hollywood movies on Vietnam War. He seemed a little disappointed that I did not proclaim myself an expert on all Asian cultures, but he said it would be all right because we would work together to educate ourselves because neither did he know a lot about Asia, not to mention Vietnam. I thus gratefully accepted his invitation. So we began our study of Vietnamese culture in the midst of the fierce demand for basic skills proficiency. The opportunity of working with him on developing a two-week curriculum was a challenge. It opened the door for me to see and to experience a world that I thought I knew, but actually had no clue about until I was invited to be a part of it for a little while. Little did I think, and as will be seen later in this narrative, this turned out to be an unexpectedly demanding task and a pivotal experience which caused me to change my entire perspective on the balance of responsibility among the education community, educators and educated alike.

The Effort Put into Preparations and Planning

In our meetings for planning the curricular unit, it was important for Mr. Parker and I to communicate the assumptions inherent in each of our unique cultural backgrounds. Our personal perspectives shaped our expectations of the types of values we wanted to convey to students in teaching the unit on Vietnam.

Negotiating the meaning of multicultural teaching

At our first meeting, I suggested to Mr. Parker that I would need to know what he would like his students to learn from his class, so that we could begin from there. We thus shared views about the values that would guide our curricular approach. Mr.

Parker said that he would like to use this class for his students to expand their horizon (views) on Asian cultures and Asian American's cultural experiences. What he said he wanted was to have a class for students to "see things from different perspectives." He also informed me that his students were artistically oriented, that they were good at learning through art, drawing, music, and social interaction. Clearly, Mr. Parker brought his training on multiple intelligences to our unit planning session. For example, he said that teaching students Chinese characters would be a way to introduce the meanings of cultural symbols in Chinese society in particular. So he thought it would be nice if we could arrange a unit that had the elements of art, music, and food.

After listening to him, I said that I agreed with his views about children's artistic tendency in acquiring knowledge. However, I shared with him that I thought that to know someone or some cultural groups requires an understanding of their values which are shaped by people's social, political, and historical contexts. I told Mr. Parker that because I thought we live in a world where resources distribution is extremely uneven among the rich and the poor as well as among various cultural and racial groups of people in different regions of the world, I thus saw learning about culture as a way for students to understand how people relate to each other as well as who they are. I shared with him that I saw learning about other cultural groups as needing to go beyond ethnic foods, visual arts, music, dance, and festivals. In other words, it would have to transcend this concrete level of understanding culture. I explained the parallel of the problem with merely teaching African music and dance during African American Month. My contention was that the narrow focus on food and holidays did not offer students an understanding of how values and beliefs are embedded in the struggles in the present and past life experience of African Americans in American society. In this preplanning session I explained my

perception that while we live in a culturally diverse world, cultural hegemony was manifested in the creation of normative truths carried through mainstream media and school curriculum. I further expressed to Mr. Parker that I thought children in urban schools needed to be empowered to challenge the existing system because they were precisely the ones who were the most disadvantaged by the existing system. I thus suggested to him that a multicultural class would be an effort to enhance social equality by empowering students through their own understanding of how power operated in producing the dominant and the dominated cultures. He said that as a black man in this society he understood what I was saying. He, too, thought that teaching culture should go beyond food and music. He also agrees hat urban children needed to learn the strategies to fight against injustice in the system. And he reiterated that he was very glad to know that we would work together to design a curriculum that would go beyond the concrete level of learning about cultural artifacts, although he reemphasized that using an artistic approach was an inviting way to involve students. Toward the end of the meeting, we came to an understanding that both of us wanted students to see things differently as a result of our unit. And we would like to prepare students to be critical thinkers by inviting them to examine the power relationship in this culturally diverse world. We thus ended our first meeting with the following questions to think about until our next meeting:

1. How do we help children relate their own life experiences to those of Vietnamese people?
2. How do we develop a unit that empowers students to be social activists in this class? While they learn about Vietnamese life experience, how do they use this knowledge in their own lives? Could we find ways to connect what they learn in class to the community?
3. How would Asian immigrant students relate to this class? How would the students who are not immigrants relate to the immigrant students through what they learn in this class?

Inquiring the capitalist curriculum

Had I not being asked to participate in Mr. Parker's class, I would not have realized how ignorant I was about South East Asia. My ignorance surprised me because Vietnam is not very far from my homeland, Taiwan. What I learned by involvement in this unit was that what I knew about Asia, the continent I come from, was much less than I knew about Europe and North America. Even in Taiwan what was taught in foreign history class and what was included in the textbooks was mainly knowledge about western civilization. The public school curriculum in Taiwan had been colonized into a Eurocentric curriculum. During my own public school and college years in Taiwan, I learned detailed information about such things as Greek and Roman civilizations, the Italian Renascence, the French Revolution, and the American War of Independence, but I realized that I had no recollection of ever having been introduced to the ethnic and cultural history of the diverse nations South East Asian. I studied the works of art by Michael Angelo and Da Vinci, but I do not remember ever having been introduced to any artists from Asian countries. I read works by Hans Christian Anderson and Mark Twain as representative of children's literature, but had not read one single piece of children's literature from other Southeast Asian countries. In my mind and, apparently, at my school it was as if they did not exist. Therefore, When Mr. Parker and I began to read the history of Vietnam, both of us were surprised by many things. First, we found how little we knew about the pain the Vietnamese people had endured as a result of centuries of successive invasions by outsiders. Mr. Parker admitted that as much as he had heard about the Vietnam War, he never really had a clear idea of the reasons for the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Neither did I. All I knew was that there had been a war between the Americans and the North Vietnamese. I knew that the United States had lost the war, and that the communists had won. The Nationalist government in Taiwan used this

information to warn people not to go against the government otherwise we would all be dominated by the communists as had happened in Vietnam. The island of Taiwan was described by our leadership as a big boat, and people were constantly reminded that we had better not to rock the boat or we would all end up like Vietnamese "boat people" floating on the ocean without homes. The famous political slogan back then was "No egg would remain unbroken if the nest fell." This old saying was thus often used as an essay topic that my teachers gave out in writing class to prepare us for high school entrance exams. We were expected to reflect upon what bloody lessons we could learn from the predicament of the Vietnamese people as a result of the conflict.

After reviewing the historical documents, Mr. Parker and I were surprised to learn that the Viet Minh had been an ally of the United States during WWII. The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, written in 1945 and modeled after the examples set by the United States in 1776 and France in 1791 was similarly a call to arms to liberate a colonized people (Vietnam) from an imperialist nation (France). By reviewing documentary films, we began to learn that the western mainstream media also played an important role in covering up and distorting the facts. Mike Wallace openly admitted that while he was a reporter at the front line, he was required by the United States government to omit certain information that would damage the war effort and to change his tone if he wrote something critical about the American involvement. The more we read, the more we felt that we had been cheated by the political and education systems in both American and Taiwanese societies. Therefore, through our own discussions and changing interpretations of these seemingly distanced and historically buried events, we concluded that the war the Vietnamese people fought for was in essence similar to the struggles for freedom fought by people down through the centuries and today by people of color in the

United States and in many third world countries. We further realized and discussed at length that what we believed had been shaped largely by the mainstream political, economic and media forces in our respective countries. While communism was constantly portrayed as the "evil" system, capitalism was the righteous one in both American and Taiwanese societies. The fact was that the colonized people in Vietnam saw that capitalism served the interests of imperialist nations and that these so-called enlightened, modern countries through their predatory and exploitative conduct towards the colonized had lost their moral ground for democracy that been based upon commitment to humanity, freedom, equality and justice. We thus thought these multiple voices would offer the two of us an opportunity to help the students to see the world through different lenses. Our teaching involved telling stories from multiple perspectives including "the enemy's," alternative views to the cultural politics provided by the mainstream media in the capitalist societies, ones that people usually would not find in their texts.

We also considered the fact that students lived in an environment that was harsh and where survival was difficult. Coincidentally, one major theme of the school's curriculum was "survival." We hoped to open these students to the concept that the fight against the injustice and oppression was not just an individual task, but that it required collective effort and long term struggle. William Ayers (1998) once suggested that educators needed to raise the consciousness of "freedom as a collective accomplishment to overcome what stands in the way of our humanity" in order to free people from the commodified freedom in the American society (p. 155). We then decided that the main theme of our unit would be "common values shared with the Vietnamese: fighting against oppression and striving for freedom."

In a lecture to the Lincoln Center Institute, Maxine Greene (1992) proclaimed that the art of education was to educate children to speak for freedom. She said:

> We want to enable the youth to see and to hear more reflectively, more intelligently, more critically. We want to help them come awake to deception, to mystification, to distortion. We want them to overcome passivity as well as mere conventionality. We want them to take their own initiatives as they come together in dialogue about what they see and what they hear and what they feel. We want them to care, to wonder, to become. (cited in Grumet, 1998, p. 135)

In light of Greene's notion of freedom as an ability to choose who we ought to be, we intended to create a space where students could develop a sense of common connections among people in a society where freedom has been reduced to promote self-righteousness and has been misused by the political regime and school curriculum to create feelings of the otherness among students rather than feelings of togetherness. In the next couple of meetings, we developed lesson plans together. We also developed a statement about the rationale for and objectives of the unit:

> While globalization of the economy has been intensified, what is taught in public school curriculum becomes increasingly critical. Currently, global/multicultural education too often focuses on the holidays and artifacts of people of various nations and cultural groups. Rarely does the curriculum address the critical components: power structure in the world among various cultural and racial groups, and the conflicting interest of countries. When school curriculum fails to reflect the reality in today's world where conflicts often occur, it also fails to empower students to see the core values they might share with each other. In Central Middle School, curriculum planning aims to prepare students with knowledge and skills to be responsible community members and visionary leaders in the 21th century. Moving beyond the holidays and hero approach to human relations in a culturally pluralistic world requires addressing controversial issues such as cultural conflict, socieo-economic and political inequalities in a world where class, race, and gender are often critical components of oppression.
>
> Furthermore, when Asian Americans have been largely invisible and silent in United States public life, knowledge of minority groups are often ignored or presented from euro-centric perspectives. When the diverse voices and life experiences of Asian American are largely missing and traditionally silenced in school curriculum, students are subjected to various stereotypes about Asians that often are presented in mass media. In this reading class, students

are expected to broaden their knowledge base on the Vietnamese American minority group. Through teaching about the Vietnamese cultural experience, we provide ways to understand how people develop strategies of resistance to social and political inequality. When urban youth struggle to counter social inequality in U.S. society, we hope that children at Central Middle School could learn that values of freedom and equality are universally appreciated and are fought hard through human history. Therefore, in this two-week curriculum unit, we intend to prepare students to be aware of the changes around the world, and more importantly, the causes and consequence of these changes bring to lives of people of diverse cultural backgrounds. While change does not occur overnight, knowing who we are and how we relate to each other is necessary in global/multicultural education. Values people commonly share and values constantly fought for across various cultural groups -- a respect for human dignity and freedom from oppression thus becomes a central notion in our class. (Fieldnote)

Critical Literacy: To begin with what we felt and experienced

While Lisa Delpit (1993) states, "literacy is much more than reading and writing, but rather, that it is part of a larger political entity"(p. 285). She argues that the literacy of dominant discourse would help students gain social power and access to economic success, she further suggests that to teach a dominant discourse to students who are members of a nondominant oppressed group would require teachers to have a strong commitment to these children's success and faith in these children's ability to gain access to dominant discourses. Because Vietnamese history had involved such a prolonged struggle for freedom from the oppression of such imperialist nations as China, France, Japan, and the United States and because, in the late twentieth century, it was the battleground of capitalist and communist ideological conflicts, we thought that we needed to teach students what physical and symbolic capital meant, and about the ways that capital was distributed in different systems. Needless to say, these concepts and vocabularies were not familiar to the students. But neither Mr. Parker nor I thought that we should compromise in accomplishing the difficult task in front

of us. We thought that it was our responsibility to figure out ways to teach language arts that would not only made sense to the children, but would also empower them to gain access to a discourse that historically had excluded them.

We thus designed a simulation game that introduced students to the notion of capital and demonstrated theoretical rules for resource distribution in communist societies. We hoped that in later class students would acquire literacy through understanding why many Vietnamese people would have supported the communist party's declaration of independence from all imperialist nations. In this game, we invited students to experience that the rich and the poor could have different interpretations of communist rule and the value of resource redistribution. On the first day of class, we asked students what they knew about the word, "capital." The majority of them said, "It's the name of a street!" One student echoed, "Yeah, my uncle lives there." The rest went wild guessing things from clothing to food. Mr. Parker responded, "Yes, it is the name of a street in our city. But there is more than that. And that is what you are going to learn today." We then had students choose from a set of mixed playing cards that we had arranged before so that each table had one student who would be rich, one middle class, and two poor. The ones who picked the cards with a King would get 20 Hershey chocolates, the ones who picked a Queen got 5, and the two students who picked Aces would get 1 chocolate.

We gave each table a piece of paper that included the rules of the game as an instructional guide. We explained which number on the cards equaled the number of chocolate they would receive. Next, we stated, "Whoever has been given the King card is entitled to make rules for the rest of the group, keeping in mind that work or service could help you earn more chocolates." We also added, "Both Mr. Parker and Mrs. Lien have the authority to redistribute chocolates and change the way things are being done." Finally, we asked them to write down the kind of deal/rules that were

being made to accumulate more chocolates and how they felt when changes were made by teachers during the middle of the game. At the top of the guide, Mr. Parker specifically added a statement in extra large bold faced typed stating: "DO NOT EAT ANY OF THE CHOCOLATES THAT YOU ARE GIVEN UNTIL MR. PARKER AND MS. LIEN HAVE GIVEN YOU PERMISSION TO DO SO.!!!!!!!" That requirement reflected Mr. Parker's experience. Without such a statement, the game probably would have been over sooner than I would have expected. Mr. Parker had thoroughly understood the students' desire for chocolate capital.

When the students saw us take out chocolates, the class immediately got excited, it was like a pot of boiling hot water. After each card was picked randomly, the initial reaction of students who got an Ace card cursed, "Damn!" and complained, "This is not fair!" Students who were lucky enough to get the King card first were cheering, but then immediately realized that they were under attack from their "poor" peers who got only one chocolate. Because the "rich" kids could not find pockets to hide the chocolates they had, they soon had their arms surrounding their chocolates and their heads and upper bodies folded on the tables covering their "property" to prevent their peers from stealing it. The "poor," on the contrary, had nothing to lose so they proceeded to grab the candy, pushing the "rich" kids' heads, bodies, arms, or even going under the tables to get the candy from below. It was a chaos. It seemed as if our plan for having "the rich" make rules would never happen because they were already satisfied with their status and all they wanted and needed at the moment was to make sure they kept their "property" safe. After two minutes, which seemed a long time because of the chaos, Mr. Parker and I went around to the tables and asked the "poor" kids whether they thought it was fair that someone got so many chocolates and they got so few. We questioned them about whether it would be a good idea if the "rich guys' shared their chocolates with them. The "poor," who

were in the majority, all cheered and agreed. The rich kids, however, were extremely upset by seeing their chocolates being given to the "poor." One kid almost burst into tears and fought hard with us when we forced him to hand over his chocolates. He was very upset for the remainder of the class period until, at the end of the class, the teachers announced that each student would get five chocolates.

In our plan, we intended to use the students' feelings and experiences as a viable instrument for them to gain access to the abstract concepts of the dominant discourse. Before the class discussion began, Mr. Parker reminded me, "We need to ask them how to relate this simulation to what they observe outside of school and also to connect it to their feelings." In class discussion, Mr. Parker asked them to take a guess about the word "capital" again, some said it was chocolate, some guessed it was money. Mr. Parker said that both answers were correct, and then further explained that there were two kinds of capital: one that we can see and use immediately like money. He gave the example that the "rich guy" in the game could be called a capitalist. I further clarified that capitalists in this society would be the ones who owned lands, factories, and labor of the people who work for them in this society. Mr. Parker also explained the even more abstract concept of the kind of capital that was less visible, but was extremely important for them, that kind of capital was skills and knowledge and it was that capital that they could learn in school. I further helped the students understand that invisible capital would help them to gain visible capital. I said, "For instance, in schools teachers don't usually give money or chocolates to students, but we teach skills and knowledge, the invisible capital, the cultural capital, so that students can use what they learn in school to get good jobs and make money. With that money, you could buy as many chocolates as you want." Because students' attachment to the chocolate was quite strong, they were excited when they had more and upset when they lost some. So when Mr. Parker asked

students about how they felt when chocolates were redistributed, they did not seem to have much trouble understanding that rich and poor people had different feelings about communism's resource redistribution. Although the game we designed together was rather too simplistic because it illustrated only in a rudimentary way how capital was accumulated and manipulated, through playing simulation games, these students learned that the meaning of capital was not just a street in their city, but the basis of a political and economic system that shaped their way of life.

When students read what French imperialists had done to the Vietnamese people in the following lessons, Mr. Parker came back to remind them how they felt when they did not have as many chocolates as the peers. They still remembered the game and thus immediately related their feelings to the Vietnamese people's fight against oppression. After reading about French imperialism, we further compared the civil rights movement in the United States to that of the Vietnamese people's struggle for independence. We asked the students to compare and contrast both groups of people in terms of a) the kinds of social conflicts people encounter, b) the action people took in each movement and the strategies they adopted to solve their problems, c) the consequence/result of their actions, and d) the similarity of what helped people get through difficult times. Because students were quite familiar with civil rights movement, many could immediately identify the similarity between the two groups' prolonged struggles. Toward the end of the unit, Mr. Parker asked students to write a short story sharing what they could learn from their friends', family members', or relatives' struggles in their lives. He told them that they could share their stories with each other on the last day of the class. We stated in the assignment:

> The Vietnamese history has one been of struggles against foreign domination (e.g., China, France, Japan, and the United States). They have shown great courage and strength in their fight for freedom. In light of their stories about surviving through difficult time, do you know one person in your family or in

your community who can tell you a story about his or her experience of working through difficulties? Please interview this person and ask the following questions:

1. Did you have a difficult time in your life? Describe what kind of difficulties you encountered (e.g., finicial difficulties, changing jobs, moving and relocating, illness, lost relatives, etc...)
2. How did you deal with the difficulties? What action you take to solve the problems?

You need to write 4-5 paragraphs. Each paragraph should consist of 4-6 sentences. You don't need to reveal the name and identity of this person.

Confirming students experience, rewriting the stories of our lives

Urban youths live in an environment that was harsh and where survival was difficult. Adopting critical pedagogy meant that we needed to confirm the struggles in our students' everyday life experience and to encourage them to tell stories of their own. By asking children to listen to and to share the stories of their friends, their families, community members, and their own struggles deliberately using pedagogies that were developed to cope with and to fight against the oppressive elements in their lives, we wished to open the space for the multiple voices that are often silenced and oppressed in schools and society. We wished to create a space where multiple realities, even if there were conflicts and contradictions among them, would be expressed and recognized in our life world of school. In a conversation she had with William Ayers, Maxine Green (1995) suggested that educators need to open the spaces for multiple voices to be heard in their classrooms in order to raise the consciousness of freedom. By sharing, reflecting, and rewriting the stories of our lives, we learn to recognize each other and ourselves through sharing what we had come to know about who we are and the shared vision that we could possibly have. She said (1995),

If you release more and more voices, if you hear more and more stories, you

> cannot but touch upon stories of resistance. There is the need to pay heed to what is being said, what is trying to break out of the silences, where the critique is – and the pain. What is there that people find they hold in common? What social visions do they share? Do they rise out of what they want for their children, for their parents, for their neighborhoods? Or are they visions of domination, of seizing power? And then there is the demand to talk about feasible action, what can be done to heal, to equalize, to repair. I am over-reaching, perhaps, trying to integrate a notion of social action with responses to the arts and the humanities in a dialogical space – where the contradictions are allowed to find expression, even as people strive towards some kind of unity.
>
> The focal idea, still, is to introduce the idea of imagination as think about what ought to be. It is to create the possibility of social vision at a moment when people seem to have given up when it comes to conceptions of utopia, of heavenly cities, all those images that informed what we still call the "American Dream." Facing what we are facing in our state and federal governments, we have to work locally, pondering decent and humane ways of coming together, opening a public sphere where multiple perspectives play a part and multiple voices open the way to the "articulate public" Dewey used to describe. We have to sow seeds of outrage, I think, wherever we are: outrage at death penalties; outrage at the existence of boat people (allow for, I keep thinking, by a holocaust mentality that screens out the human face). This has to be a part of what we try to make. There have to be confrontations, refusals, even as there have to be moments of commitment and hope against hope (Green, quoted in Ayers, 1995, p.320).

On the last day of the unit, we heard the voices of students who were positioned in multiple locations within the society. We had a white female student whose father had been in the Vietnam War tell us a story about her father. She said that once when he was a young man, he went off to be in a distant war for reasons that he did not clearly understand. He suffered in the war and came back home with a difficult life waiting for him. He survived and, through his daughter's contribution, his story was shared with Mr. Parker's class. This girl confided that she had not talked with her father about his war experience before. We also heard stories from the Asian immigrant students whose life experiences were themselves witnesses of the

oppressed groups searching and struggling for freedom. When they read their stories in broken English and sometimes barely audible voices, they told powerful stories about life, humanity and love.

Among the many Asian immigrants was a girl named Maya. She was always quiet. I often saw her in other reading classes Mr. Parker conducted. She was constantly immersed in books as if she was not paying attention to what was happening around her. She was very small. When she sat on a chair, her feet did not touch the ground. While she did not want to read her story out loud at the beginning of the students' reports, with encouragement from teachers and classmates, she read her written work for the first time in Mr. Parker's class. [Note: the misspellings and punctuation are the way it was written]:

> In 1974 and 1975 the Vietnamese came to our country to take over the land they are fighting war over the land. The soldiers kill many people including women, children, and men. My Parent we moved place to place. We don't have any food to eat, we have to eat leaves and root to survive. My parents decide to escape to Thailand, so we have to crossing Mekon River to other side of Thailand. During the escaping my mom and my sister die of hunger and poisoning. After we make to Thailand my father tell my sister, my brother, and I that now we **are free** [the child's hand writing became bold with heavy pencil marks for these two words, making it seem like she either used more strength in writing these two words or she wrote over them twice], we have to find a place to live. We are so happy that we are free of dieing but that is so sad that we don't have mother anymore. One year after that my father said we are going to America and start a new life in there if we living here there is no good for my children there is no income to support my children's education when we got to America it is ever harder because we don't speak English, but we go to school and learn English other 2 years. We speak English and thing going easier. I still missing my mom a lot I remember the difficult time, sad time and happy time all these things still in my mind.(fieldnote)

After Maya finished reading her story, the class was quiet with the feelings that we just wanted to reflect and think for a while. There was no need of language – the

space of quietness was needed after we had communicated poignant stories and intimate thoughts with ourselves as well as with each other. About half a minute later, one student commented, "That is so sad!" Students then spontaneously started to clap and cheer for Maya by calling out her name, "Maya, Maya." It was a way of expressing their feelings for her. Mr. Parker said, "Maya, I never knew that about you. Now I have great respect for you!" Proclaiming that Maya's story was tough to follow, Mr. Parker shared some thought with the class about his own struggle when he was a child. He told students that he had lost his father when he was very young. His dad died young because he was too heavy and had a lot of health problems. Mr. Parker explained that as a result of his father's condition, he paid great attention to heath and tried to remain fit because he did not want his children to have to go through the same difficult time that he did. In this debriefing period, I began to realize that the majority of the students had shared stories about losing relatives. Death seemed to be so close to them.

Nel Noddings (1998) once suggested that asking the question, "What are you going through?" is central to moral life. She contends, "Asking such a question fastens our attention on the living other and not on a set of principles or our own righteousness"(p.160). When the histories of the Vietnamese people at the beginning of our unit were combined with the life stories brought in and shared by the children, we saw the intersection of all human struggles for freedom and also how the journey of searching for freedom and humanity was often detoured and degraded when the lines between enemies and friends were defined by the political regime. These political ideologies have seemed clear-cut at one time, but after hearing the stories about the consequences, their distinction became blurred in the real life experiences. While I had noticed that the Asian American students always sat together and rarely spoke in Mr. Parker's class, the curriculum unit had brought the various groups of

students closer and reduced the distance between Asian American immigrant students and non-immigrant students on the team. The Asian American students had shared their life experience with others and, in turn, learned where their peers were coming from. Thus was created a sense that the immigrant students were no longer quiet and invisible in this team. In retrospect, as far as teaching symbolic capitals, there still was a long way to go. However, every small step counts.

The Constraints

In working with Mr. Parker on this curriculum unit, many things happened in ways I had not anticipated. When teachers at Central Middle School were supposedly encouraged to take risks in experimenting with various ways of reaching children, it was, nevertheless, particularly difficult in this urban school setting. In this section, I will address issues that were critical in implementing a curricular approach that was unconventional in regards to the current public school context.

Time Consuming and Labor Intensive

Mr. Parker suggested that we would meet once a week in September and twice a week in October to discuss the objectives and pedagogies of the unit. However, we met more intensively during the last two weeks before the unit began to prepare curricular materials. Because Mr. Parker has expressed that his expectation from me was to "feed him information on the Asian American cultural experience" and my schedule was more flexible than his, I became the major researcher on this subject in terms of finding background information. We worked together in planning and preparing curricular approaches and materials. He conducted the class, I served as his assistant. While he also used his spare time to study the topic and shared his perspectives with me when we met, he was the one who made final decisions as to

which materials and approaches would be appropriate for his class.

Had I never worked on planning a curriculum unit for these American middle school children on a subject that was unfamiliar to me, I would never have known how much time would be needed to accomplish the tasks. First, I went on-line, searching for information. I tried to find books and other documents on Vietnamese history, culture, art and religion. I looked for appropriate videotapes, and documentary films. To locate available materials, during weekends and after schools, I went to local book stories, to the city, county and university libraries, ranging over a distance of about a hundred miles. After spending considerable time reading the printed materials and watching the tapes and films that I checked out, I found that the materials I was previewing were all rather outdated. So, I spent more time searching on-line for more current literature, especially pieces written by the new generation of Vietnamese youth. So, in these many time-consuming ways I explored various curriculum materials and ideas for implementing our unit. I noticed that although the online research was a relatively small part of my preparation of background information, I estimated that I spent at least one hundred and fifty to two hundred hours doing online research. When we used a story in class that I had found on-line, students immediately pointed out that "someone was working late" because the time on the upper right corner of the page indicated that the materials were printed out after midnight.

Although it was wonderful experience to share ideas, perspectives, thoughts, and curricular approaches with Mr. Parker, our meetings were time consuming. The first was an hour-long meeting after Mr. Parker had sent his students to the bus after school. The rest of our meeting times ranged from half an hour to one and a half hours. We met either during Mr. Parker's lunchtime or after school. Meetings were longer if we met after school. Granted, the extra time for all these meetings had to squeezed out

of Mr. Parker's routine. And, he had a whole range of obligations to fulfill as a teacher at Central Middle School. Moreover, he had two young children to take care of after school because his wife was taking classes in a doctoral program at a university and she also had a full-time job in the school district. If we met during his lunch time, meetings often came to an abrupt end when his team members came to call him for their team meetings. One of the most vivid images still in my mind was watching him wolf down sandwiches after our meetings, and seeing him chew a mouthful of food on his way to the next room for team meetings.

When we began the unit, it was further labor intensive because we took half an hour to one hour or longer to debrief what we had learned after each lesson. We also had to adjust the upcoming curricular approaches when we found one or another approach did not make sense to students. We spent hours after school redesigning reading materials. When we found that a reading on Vietnamese history was too long and too difficult for students because of too complicated background information or too little to accommodate for gaps in students' prior knowledge, we had to sit down and edit whole articles and retype the reading materials ourselves after a long school day in preparation for the next day's lesson. When we found we needed immediate changes in materials for the next day's class, we spent our own money making copies because it took too many days to have the school make copies for us.

The time that I spent alone, along with the time we spent together outside of class instructional time, was incredibly longer than I had originally anticipated. Yet, all of this time was taken for only a two-week curriculum unit. And even with the efforts we made, there was no way to insure that the learning experience for students was going to be a quality one. Like most experiments, there is no guarantee of success when people take risks to experiment with new ideas and different pedagogies. I would say that both Mr. Parker and I were very flexible with changes in responding

to classroom dynamics. We never hesitated to adjust curricular approaches when we found things did not work as we originally anticipated. It was awful to recognize that we had wasted the students' time because we had not thoroughly thought through certain lesson components ahead of time. As I will discuss in the next section, the class lost focus for a couple days because of our miscommunication with each other on the purpose of teaching art projects in this unit. Perhaps it is human nature that people expect to be rewarded when they have made such great efforts. Therefore, we were frustrated when we found that we lost some students because some of the readings we chose were too lengthy and too difficult for slow readers. It was particularly upsetting to spend so much time and effort in planning and still not feel totally satisfied with the students' responses.

The intensive labor of team planning and the outside-of-school time spent in this teaching experience thus offered me an opportunity to understand why not many teachers worked on curriculum integration and innovative units in this school. Although test-driven curriculum was in demand, another reason for the absence of creative curriculum and pedagogy was that achieving curriculum integration generally is so labor intensive and time consuming. Granted much of the team meeting time was spent on school governance, nevertheless, even if most of it had been spent on integrated unit planning, there was not enough time to effectively develop and implement curriculum integration in actuality. As Jenny, a bilingual language art teacher, pointed out, "we all talk about how this school should be, but in reality, we don't have time [to accomplish our ideals]. We talk about integrated teaching being important, but as you see in our team, everybody just does their own things in their class. There is very little integrated teaching going on. The truth is that we have no time to do it." In my estimation, the workload for curriculum integration in a school with the same structure as Central Middle School basically demands that

teachers "donate blood"(McNeil, 2000). I do not know how long any person could survive donating blood on a daily basis. They would be drained professionally and personally. In the end, I asked myself, " how many teachers could do that with so little structural support within the system?" As Mr. Parker said on the last day of the curriculum unit, "Nancy, you know very well that if you were not here, there is no way I could do it myself."

Reproduction of Social Stratification

One of the goals in our unit was to challenge students' ability to follow complex ideas and take on challenging work. Therefore, the materials we used and the content knowledge we expected them to learn were by no means easy for middle school students. Because we did not want to compromise our goal by giving students easier tasks, we always struggled with the possibility of losing students' interest. Furthermore, because of Mr. Parker's tolerance of my ignorance about American students, we made many mistakes in selecting articles that had too advanced a vocabulary for some students to follow. So what I gradually began to notice was that social stratification was reproduced when materials were chosen by teachers who did not take into account the gap among students' different reading levels. When this occurred, slow readers were left behind. I found that once again, the students who came from more resourceful family backgrounds were usually the ones who learned the fastest and responded the fastest. The ones with lower reading levels were always struggling with understanding the texts. The achievement and confidence gaps among students were large. In evaluating our teaching success, I must confess that we did not succeed in decreasing these gaps, particularly when the reading materials were way too heavy or lengthy. What I discovered during my time working closely with students was that when the fastest readers finished their reading

and immediately grasped the major statements and arguments, the slower readers were still struggling with decoding and comprehending the words. Yet, in our unit, the questions we asked were mainly on the critical or reflective level that required higher thought processes and more analytical skills to respond based upon the information given. Students also had to use outside knowledge and advanced evaluative thinking. It seemed to me that students were very reflective, irrespective of whether they were fast or slow readers. But the slow readers were lost and felt behind when the information provided was rather incomplete and required prior knowledge. When we as a class worked together to produce a concept map, comparing and contrasting the similarities between the American civil rights movement and the Vietnam independence movement, the map was created as a group project. But the students who showed the most understanding and came up with the most ideas to share were mainly the ones who were at higher reading levels. Most of these fast readers were European white American students whose parents were professionals or teachers who worked at Central Middle School. After the concept map was made with information based on the article on Vietnam's history that students had read over the previous three days, an African American boy asked me: "What is WWII?" I explained to him immediately, but I felt very sorry because I had not anticipated that there were students who did not know about WWII. I left the room with doubts as to exactly what the slow readers had learned – or had been taught – in our unit. The class continued, all the projects all looked fine, the games were fun, and yet there were children who were left out. When we deprived these students of attention, we were helping to reproduce our own class hierarchy.

The social stratification was also reproduced in the criteria which was used to grade the students' homework assignments. Mr. Parker expected students to complete home work. Students who did not bring completed homework received a

grade that was equivalent to an "F" or failing grade. One day Mr. Parker asked me to help him check students' assignments. The assignment was for each individual student to find the meaning of the ten new vocabulary words in an article. I found an Asian immigrant boy had turned in his assignment with the vocabulary finished only from the L part of the list. I felt strange because most students began with A and got to midway down the alphabet, whereas this student finished from L to Z. I thought he may have had some special habit. When I asked him, he responded that the front part of his dictionary was lost because his baby sister had played with the dictionary. His family could not find the cover of the dictionary, and eventually the front pages had just fallen out page by page. So the only dictionary his family had began with L. When I walked around the class to find this student a dictionary, I found only one dictionary for the entire group. In this same class, there was a student who brought to class his ten-pages of color-printed vocabulary which consisted of definitions and examples. This African American boy, whose parents are professionals, told me that these materials came from their own color printer. Mr. Parker gave the student whose parents were professionals the highest grade. While I had asked Mr. Parker to give the Asian American immigrant student some time to finish his homework on the ground of his special condition of not having a dictionary at his home, Mr. Parker told me that there were many students like him who did not have a dictionary at their homes.

The Compromise: Seeing art class as fun stuff

Words are open for multiple interpretations. Communication among teachers is one critical component in curriculum planning. When Mr. Parker and I met for curriculum planning, he said, "Cultural diversity is fun staff that could be used as a break from textbook materials." I did not hear the message behind his statement because I thought that he agreed with me that we should teach beyond food and

festival for cultural understanding. I thought it would be fun to challenge the way we see ourselves and the way otherness is created through a critical examination of the normative value system in this society. To me, it was fun to question the relationship between self and others that was defined by the political regime. It was also fun to search for common values so that we could relate to each other through learning the cultural experience of the Vietnamese. However, I ignored the context that he knew and had tried to tell me about. I was not perceptive enough to understand the hidden messages behind the agreement by a teacher who worked long days in isolation and now – for the sake of his students and himself – just wanted to teach and learn something fun about cultural diversity. I was slow to learn that Mr. Parker expected more of cultural artifact activities than I thought might be possible with this approach. He was painfully aware that his students had just suffered through the boredom and stress of taking standardized tests.

When Mr. Parker suggested that we should do something fun such as art project to reward students for their hard work in learning about the conflicts in Vietnam, we arranged one-day of paper cutting with just a short set of reading materials that introduced the history of paper-cutting and video demonstration. We decided at the end of the week for this project because we thought Friday was a good day for something relaxing and students could have project to take home and finish during the weekend. Starting from Monday, beginning with reading an article, we would introduce students with the transition and adjustment that Vietnamese people had to make when they came to the United States. However, Mr. Parker decided he needed to take out a couple of curse and slang words from the article during weekend. I did not think it would be a problem because Mr. Parker thought it would be a good article to present the long and difficult journey Vietnamese immigrants made to the United States. It was an article written by a young writer who was first generation of

Vietnamese American. However, he came to class the following Monday and he did not had the material ready. So we continued paper-cutting for another two days until Mr. Parker got the materials ready. Three-days of paper-cutting of Chinese cultural symbols, in my opinion, was too much for a two-week unit. One student came to ask me at the third day of this activity, "Why do we do paper-cutting in this class instead of in art class." I replied, "good question!" and said nothing because that was my question, too. While Mr. Parker apologized to me that he did not edit the article, I did notice that he spent some time decorating his room with colorful paper-cutting works from students. Because of the two-day delay and another day absorbed by slow service by the copy room, we had to remove one article, a story about a veteran who came back from the Vietnam War and became a friend of a Vietnamese refugee family. Although when I reflected upon it, I realized that it was not a big deal, it did bother me at the time we worked together. I felt frustrated because I felt that we were wasting students' time.

When Mr. Parker first said that he wanted to take a break from regular class and asked me to feed him information on Vietnam and plan to teach fun staff when we met at the hallway, I heard that, but I did not realize that was probably what he mostly wanted. But he probably had difficulty saying no when I said that my view of culture was that it concerned human relationships that had a lot to do with power structure among different racial, gender, class, language, and cultural groups. I guess he found it difficult to tell me up front what he really wanted or he did not realize exactly what I meant until we got into the "heavy stuff" (Mr. Parkers' phrase). Because he did not object my way of seeing it, I was not aware of his hints on the subject in our early conversations about the unit. After we taught the unit together, we got to know more about each other and he often mention to me and his colleagues how much he was enjoying the fun project – Chinese paper cutting. It was then that

I realized that it was that activity that probably matched more what he had originally expected from me about planning a unit on Asian culture. I thus felt apologetic because I started to suspect that he must have felt that he did not know what to do with me and all my crazy ideas. His wife later told me that he talked a lot about the discussions we had and the unit that we did together when he got home. I guessed there would be a big part about "that crazy woman...." When I told his wife that I had brought him more trouble than he originally anticipated, he just sat there and laughed. I guessed that laughter meant yes. But one thing I was pretty sure was that he really liked to have his room decorated with colorful paper-cutting projects.

Collins (1995) argues that art has been taught in schools in ways that reinforce the basic values of a male-dominant curriculum. Folk art, traditionally a women's field, was not treated as real art. The literacy building around paper-cutting would be a rich and meaningful learning experience if we could have read into the folk art all the conscious, critical, multiple, and political meanings that accompanied our interactions with it. We could create a space for meaning-making through learning the life worlds of folk art like paper-cutting. We could transform our belief and values through this kind of art literacy. We could have had a reflective classroom dialogue on art literacy (Greene, 1995). I did not think reading into the art work and activities on paper-cutting was less worthy of the classroom time than reading from a "heavy" article. But I was bothered by the ways that we treated this activity and Mr. Parker's perception about doing it. When Mr. Parker said, we need to take a break from the school curriculum and do some fun stuff, he did not treat either the cultural learning or the folk art as legitimate knowledge, but rather as "a break" from the school curriculum – as if cultural learning is not part of the school curriculum. The way paper-cutting was treated as something that has little relation with thinking and reflecting on the values embedded in the activity and art form. And that bothered me.

However, perhaps it was the negotiation of our diverse meanings that was important. I did feel that I should respect his space, and not give him more "heavy stuff." After all, he was extraordinarily patient with me, with someone who really knew very little about teaching in an urban school setting.

Conclusion

While curriculum integration is an idea that brings diverse dimensions of knowledge into the classroom, what approaches teachers might take after their negotiation and compromise is still rather unclear. The approach itself does not guarantee more meaningful learning than an intellectually challenged lecture. Neither does it say much about what values are manifested in the interdisciplinary teaching approach. Teachers who wished to give their students educational experiences that were close to their life experiences – and not just from commercial texts – were constrained by time and resources in this urban school setting. Without further material and personnel resources being put into urban schools, progressive curriculum reform ideals will continue to be constrained in urban school settings.

In this study, I witnessed a school teacher struggling to choose between liberation and control, between freedom and oppression. There is joy and tears in the struggles and dilemmas a progressive teacher faced in trying to actualize his educational beliefs in the context of daily teaching in an under-resourced school. There is a lack of structural support in actuality for progressive curriculum because there are simply not enough human and material resources to implement these effectively in urban school settings. What is really demanded is what Linda M. McNeil (2000) portrayed in her study of urban schooling: under-funded urban schools that managed to excel against all the odds, but were running on the "blood of teachers" (p.109). Therefore, although test-driven curriculum was in demand, another

reason for the absence of progressive curriculum and pedagogy was its labor intensive and time consuming nature.

Community in the making: a democratic project ahead of us

Public school system, as the major cultural institution that produces legitimate knowledge, is an arena for competing democratic values. Progressive educators have rarely had control over public schools in any United States location. Progressive school reform, with its ideal to prepare children to become democratic citizens, demands much more time, energy, and creativity from teachers than the social efficiency model that emphasizes cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and immediate outcomes that can be measured by test scores. Therefore, when educators envision a society in which children from financially disadvantaged families are given an opportunity to be educated for first-rate citizenship in progressive schools, the task of implementing this in urban school settings is a challenging one.

Sandra Hollingsworth (1998) once recalled that Maxine Greene's interpretation of freedom had helped her to understand that "freedom is the space to create something new in relationship" (p. 75). In light of Greene's notion of freedom, researchers who advocate for progressive education and the school teachers who try to implement the progressive ideals have to come together in a plurality or as a community of workers for democracy. If we want schools to change, we need to ask what we could do to fulfill the emancipatory goals of education. Asking such questions is in order if we are to understand the transformative goals of educational scholarship.

What does it take to prepare urban youth for democratic citizenship in urban school settings? William Ayers's interpretation of freedom helps to answer such a question. He said, "freedom is linked to the capacity to imagine a better world,

linked as well as to a coming together of many people to identify deficiencies and obstacles and the unendurable. Freedom, then requires consciousness, and collectivity and action"(1998, p.155). Indeed, educators who see schooling as a journey for emancipation and freedom do need to come together in conscious action. Changes do not occur overnight. It is the daily work that has no glamour that really counts. Living in an age when the minds and bodies of teachers and students are subjected to a normalization of schooling that does not always meet their needs or serve their interests, the collective will of all democratic educators must come together to challenge the oppressions of our time.

There were teachers I did contact with, but did not get to write about in this research. Just as Mr. Parker, they also work in loneliness and isolation as they fight against the deep, oppressive structure of conventional schooling. Progressive curriculum theorists need to work hand-in-hand with teachers in urban schools to make democratic education a reality. Curricularlists and teachers could work together to reflect upon the meanings of their work and, most importantly, to understand the complexity of teaching and develop progressive pedagogies that might work in urban schools. Through exploring and interrogating the multiple meanings of teaching that are much more complicated than any single educational theory could explain through linear logical deduction, researchers and teachers could learn together to develop pedagogies to actualize education for democracy. The knowledge of teachers needs to be legitimized through our efforts in doing action research with them. The educational research community should challenge the conventional notion of knowledge; that is, that only the printed word counts as educational scholarship in research institutions. We need to make it clear that the knowledge to be acquired through educational inquiry could not possibly be attained by our sitting in offices in front of computer screens. We need to value projects in which we

actively participate in schools and communities to bring about educational and social changes. We need to have a new relationship with our works and with educators at local school sites. As Maxine Greene (1998) said in a conversation with a group of teachers: "I like Dewey's idea of a community in the making. Not that there *is* a community, but community in the making: through dialogue, through doing things together, through shared concern, identifying something that is shared that can move you to some kind of action" (p.27). In light of Greene's interpretation of community, I would suggest that the field of curriculum studies should be relocated to local school sites.

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